

“What they love about sports is what I love about esports” - How esports factors into Australian national identity

Introduction

Arguably more than any other country, sport holds a strong cultural significance in Australia. The standing hegemonic Australian identity can be traced back to the eventual succession of Australian sporting teams over British teams in the nineteenth century (Mewett 1999; Horton 2000). This demonstration of prowess and superiority over the colonial ‘motherland’ became a key distinction between ‘Britons’ raised in Australia and those in Great Britain (Horton 2000). In time, this distinction evolved into a deeply ingrained and celebrated element of the hegemonic Australian national identity which reigns today.

While this veneration of sport endured as a central theme in Australians’ constructions of national identity, notions of sport have shifted throughout the ages. As sports, particularly Australian sports, evolved so too did renditions of Australian national identities. Notably, the glorification of toughness during the formation of Australian organised sport instilled sports-expressed masculine aggression in constructions of the authentic Australian (Burgess, Edwards, and Skinner 2003). Initially expressed on the playing field, this grittiness has come to extend to Australian sport fandom and other facets of Australian society where sport holds significance, such as the school system, media landscape, and government (Stewart et al. 2004). More broadly, sport has been long noted as a nation-building tool across various countries and contexts (Keim 2003; Koch 2013; Charawy and Houlihan 2020).

Perhaps the most recent disruption to contemporary notions of sport is esports. While other ‘non-traditional’ sports like skateboarding, surfing, and dance have sparked noteworthy debate, esports’ inherent computerised, digital nature has fuelled intense arguments across various discourses regarding the fundamental qualifiers for what is or is not a sport. Regardless of esports’ contested status, it is undeniable that a significant number of popular esports formats are at least sports-like. On a related note, popular conventional sports have become increasingly digitised in regard to their competition, media production, and organisation. The COVID-19 pandemic has also seen the convergence of esports and sports into hybrid formats, such as in the NBA and NASCAR (Ke and Wagner 2022). Esports is not the only manifestation of digitisation in and around sports; it reflects the expansive digitisation of society, culture, and life (Scholz and Vyugina 2019; Zhong et al. 2022). The contested status of esports as a sport and the position of sport enjoyment as a hegemonic aspect of Australian national identity raises some pressing questions. To what extent does esports factor into Australian national identity? Conversely, how do hegemonic notions of Australian national identity shape Australian esports fandom and spectatorship?

In beginning to answer these questions, it is prudent to explore how similar inquiries have been approached in relation to other regions. Much esports literature is framed by regionality, originating from works investigating competitive video gaming being played akin to a professional spectator sport in South Korea (Jin 2010). Scholars focused on other regions note how esports has been influential in individuals’ and nations’ reconstructions of identity for a contemporary digital landscape, with a significant portion of such research focused on China. Notable work has been produced by Yu (2018) and Zhao (2018) which

illustrate how Chinese prowess in international esports regarding both competition and industry stands as a significant source of national pride among young Chinese people, reinforcing and reinterpreting notions of nationalism and citizenship for a new context (Ismangil 2018). This significant Chinese investment in the digital games and esports industries, sustained player success at high level international esports, and fervent Chinese esports fandom are propulsive elements of China's efforts to cement its dominance at "the world's digital frontier" (Yu 2018). Similar observations have been made of South Korea, the country which arguably set the precedent of large-scale organised professional esports for the rest of the world (Jin 2010). Much like the case of China, much of South Korean influence stems from national government, industry, and media investment, embracing and facilitating the development of esports in the country (Jin 2010).

In contrast to these major esportsing regions, Australia stands as a relatively small nation with minimal influence on the global stage of esports (Carter et al. 2017). Reflecting this status is the small amount of government and industry support for esports in Australia when compared to countries like China and South Korea. Besides shedding light onto a less investigated, smaller esports region, this work explores ways in which esports relates to reimaginings and negotiations of national identity in an increasingly digitised world. As will be made clear going forward, esports in Australia acts as both a subject around which identity is negotiated, as well as an apparatus through which it is expressed.

The forthcoming paragraphs will explore the observations and findings of two ethnographic studies, one conducted in 2017 across two major Australian esports events, and the other conducted in 2018 in an Australian esports bar. Together, they provide insights into how Australian esports fans construct their identities. Specifically, these identities present insight into how certain aspects of the hegemonic Australian identity are challenged, while others are upheld. In doing so, these identities help to portray what an authentic contemporary Australia looks like.

Sport and Australia

The basis of nationalism demands compatriots share a sense of fundamental sameness. Mewett (1999) argues that historically, such senses of sameness were derived from distinctions of ethnicity, religion, or class. More recently, the diversity and complexities of modern societies lead compatriots to instead subscribe to a "myth of cultural homogeneity" (Mewett 1999) based on supposed aphorisms of the nation's birth; in the case of Australia these often being clerical properties of the bush, loss of innocence through war, and sporting prowess. It is important to note however that these are perpetuated origin myths of a colonial Australia which largely ignores Indigenous Australians before European invasion, the plights of Indigenous Australians after European settlement, and the various cultural contributions of non-European Australian immigrants (Ireland 2018).

As previously discussed, the embracement of sport as a key value in Australian nationalism stems from a colonial origin; the besting of the British in sporting competition by colonial descendants raised in Australia. Despite this connection, the value of sport in Australia has transcended its original context and is also often embraced by non-hegemonic Australian identities. As Hallinan and Judd (2012a) note, social structures in Indigenous Australian communities are often strongly influenced by sport. They assert that sport stands as one of a small number of avenues for success available to Indigenous Australians in light of their limited "affirmative life opportunities." Indeed, many distinguished and revered Indigenous

Australians are national sporting icons. Similarly, sport serves to ease immigrant populations into Australian society. For example, Zulfiqar, Strazdins, and Banwell (2021) observe how South Asian immigrant children in Australia often find a sense of belonging through participation in sport. Such observations extend to the resettlement of refugees in Australia, with the Australian national government employing youth sporting programs as a mechanism to adjust to an unfamiliar culture and way of life (Northcote and Casimiro 2009; Jeanes, O'Connor, and Alfrey 2015). In short, sport acts as a common unifying theme connecting various Australian identities, whether they are hegemonic or not.

Despite the unifying effects of sports in Australia, it is argued that such endeavours are acts to 'mainstream' minority groups into embracing and accepting dominant hegemonic Australian values. Scholars including Tascón (2008) and Hallian and Judd (2012a; 2012b) extend this argument to assert that this mainstreaming is more accurately a process of 'whitestreaming,' where the "invisibility of Anglo-Australian narratives" (Hallian and Judd 2012b) are constructed as standard in contrast to other Australian narratives; a notion that a person of any ethnic background can find success and belonging as long as they recognise and adhere to the hegemonic normality of white Australian narratives. This perspective speaks to the more recent construction of the multicultural Australian origin myth; the idea that modern Australia is built on the immigration of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as those of Indigenous Australians and their cultures. While this post-WW2 nation-building exercise sought out to establish a sense of shared cultural inheritance by emphasising the diversity of the country's inhabitants, shifts within Australia's governments starting in the 1970s (reflecting similar shifts in Europe) saw notions of Australian multiculturalism reinterpreted as centred around citizenship rather than post-ethnicity (Moran 2011). This shift signalled a symbolic return to assimilation policies that the introduction of multiculturalism was intended to replace (Moran 2011; van Krieken 2012). As Bruce and Hallinan (2001) argue, the national celebration of Indigenous and non-white Australian sportspeople like Cathy Freeman at the Sydney 2000 Olympics stands as a type of superficial national 'evidence' exemplifying the supposed success of Australian multiculturalism and repaired race relations within the country.

In summary, sport stands as perhaps the least controversial of Australia's national origin myths. Remaining steadfast across changes in hegemonic and non-hegemonic Australian identities, sport has stood as one of the first ways that a distinct sense of Australianess was constructed and later as a grand assimilator for supposed multicultural nation building. Despite this wide celebration of sport in Australia, it nevertheless stands as a factor which can exclude people from identifying as an authentic Australian. While Zulfiqar, Strazdins and Banwell (2021) identify how sport engagement helps to provide a sense of belonging to immigrant children, they also identify how children who didn't engage in sports, were overweight or were otherwise perceived as non-athletic were often ostracised and ridiculed by their peers.

Method

The two present studies were conducted as a part of a broader ethnographic research project concerned with exploring lived experiences of esports spectatorship within Australia. As a methodology, ethnography centres around a theoretical framework stipulating that groups of individuals can be best understood by becoming "immersed in their way of life" (Blaikie and Priest 2019). Regardless of the research context, the core tenets of ethnographic research implore researchers to embed themselves closely among the subject

or subjects of research, adopting an epistemology that human meaning and knowledge are generated from social interactions between people within the specific contexts in which they occur (Atkinson 2016). Much ethnographic research is characterised by their use of both observation and participatory methods which see the researcher closely interact with the field and the people within it. Thus, such a methodology was chosen for the two studies and the overarching research project, as it specifically sought to explore Australia esports fans' lived experiences of spectatorship, and to look beyond the technologies associated with esports and explore how fans engage with and around these technologies (Dourish 2014)

While both studies were aligned with the core tenets of the ethnographic tradition of social investigation (Button 2000), their approaches differed to suit the contexts of their respective field sites.

Study 1 at the two 2017 Sydney esports events took the form of a *rapid ethnography*, inspired by approaches developed by Hughes et al. (1995), Millen (2000), and Button (2000). As data collection took place during the finite period of two esports events, a more traditional long-format ethnographic approach would not have been possible. Instead, the employed approach made use of "time deepening" (Millen 2000) strategies to collect a substantial amount of ethnographic data from multiple sources during the relatively brief data collection periods. Data were generated through field observations of the events and their attendees, my own personal participation in and experience of esports spectatorship at the events, attendee interviews, the capture of photographs of the events, and the reviewing of the events' online livestreams as recorded on a computer for later analysis.

Study 2 at the esports bar took the form of a more traditional, long format ethnography. Unlike the finite site availability of Study 1, the bar site of Study 2 acted as a continuously accessible field, enabling the field work to extend for 5 continuous months. The longer duration of Study 2 allowed me to gain an intimate familiarity of the bar's social and cultural dynamics. During the five-month period I spent two-to-three nights a week at the bar, making observations, spectating esports, and partaking in casual conversation with patrons. While initially employing a "wallflower" (Adler and Adler 1987) observational approach, over the 5 months I eventually transitioned to a more participatory method as I became a frequent presence in the bar and quickly understood that one cannot remain a passive observer in the dynamic confines of the venue.

At the end of the research project, the generated data were collated and transcribed where appropriate. Within ethnographic approaches there is a celebrated flexibility in analysis methods, with no one approach seen as peerless. There nevertheless exists a range of tools and approaches commonly employed by ethnographers, often taking the form of thematic categorisations of data (Angorosino 2007). This was the case for Study 1 and Study 2. Study 1 drew on a more structured approach, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2020) approach to thematic analysis. In contrast, the amount of data generated over a long period of time in Study 2 afforded a more free-flowing and iterative approach, guided by Geertz's (1973) "thick description" through which themes from the data are generated through describing observations and interpretations with nuance and detail that extend beyond surface-level observations.

Esports in Australia

The two Australian esports events at the centre of the first ethnographic study are significant for several reasons. In the grand scale of global esports they are not of particular

note, being moderately sized events when compared to the grand spectacles of major esports events hosted in the northern hemisphere. Similarly, with the haste at which esports has grown and evolved over the past decade, it is a stretch to suggest that these two events are entirely representative of esports in 2023 both in Australia and globally. Nevertheless, their significance lies with the context in which they occurred. Taking place in 2017, the Intel Extreme Masters Sydney and Overwatch World Cup Sydney Qualifiers were among the first major esports events to take place in Australia. At the time, IEM Sydney was the largest Australian esports event in history, with attendance numbers reaching around 7000 each day of the three-day event (ESL Gaming n.d.)

However, this significance lies not entirely in their status as landmark events, but rather the opportunities they provided Australian esports fans. As the first major esports events in Australia, they would not only likely grant Australian esports fans their first opportunity to attend an esports event in-person, but also be among the first times that Australia and Australian esports fans had the opportunity to present themselves on the global stage of esports. Being at the two events I felt an atmosphere of keen anticipation among attendees; a chance to experience what other fans in larger sporting regions had long had the opportunities to partake in. Fans attended, cheered, and relished in the experience not simply to support a favourite team, player, or video game title, but also to celebrate esports in Australia as a whole.

The esports bar at the centre of the second ethnographic study is significant for similar reasons. Opened in central Melbourne during 2017, the venue was the first esports bar in Australia. A somewhat hidden venue in an unassuming basement surrounded by towering office buildings, those in-the-know who descend the bar's stairs would come to find themselves in a dimly lit space bathed in red and blue neon. Operated in a similar vein as a conventional sports bar, the venue features several wall-mounted monitors displaying various esports both live and pre-recorded for patrons to watch while enjoying a range of gaming-inspired foods and drink. The venue acted as a rare venue in Australia which offered consistent opportunities for public communal spectatorship. In doing so, the bar acted as a community anchor for the Melbourne esports community.

Frequented by a diverse range of patrons ranging from businesspeople to students, the bar took on a liminal quality and stood as a third place; a site which sits between the home (the first place) and workplace (the second place) which facilitates and maintains a local culture that offers respite to its patrons from the structures of everyday life (Oldenberg 1989). Indicative of this third-place quality was the bar's flattened social hierarchy, which saw patrons leave their identities at the door and become united simply as esports fans. As an emergent, consistently available site of esports spectatorship, the bar stood as a site in which a local esports culture was fostered. This enabled Melbournians in creating their own fan identities.

Esports and Australian national identity

When analysing the data generated across the two studies, a major theme identified was the intersection of fan and national identities. As newly afforded opportunities for Australian esports fans to congregate and partake in esports spectatorship outside of the home, attendees across the two studies were presented with an opportunity to construct their identities as esports fans. While likely already having a sense of fan identity situated in online esports cultures, the two Australian stadium events and the Melbourne esports bar

present the necessity for a new type of esports fan identity: a localised one representative of Australian esports. As I have explored in previous articles (Cumming 2018; 2021), fans at both the stadium and the bar were not passive in their spectatorship. Rather, they played active roles in working to construct an authentic Australian esports culture where no dominant notion had previously existed. Both speak to a need to not only be a part of a local esports culture, but also to figure out what it should be.

While there exists a long history of research in conventional sports fandom studies regarding team identification (Lock and Heere 2017), the construction of identities across the present two studies concerned more fundamental and foundational questions: what is an authentic esports fan and what do I need to do to be one? As one interviewee at IEM Sydney proclaimed:

When you're online and you hear them talk about the crowds and how energetic and how like really exciting it is being here and you think 'oh yeah, but you get the same experience online' but you really don't. Being out here is a completely different feeling than being sitting at home behind a computer screen

Perhaps the most fundamental attribute of esports fan identity that fans across the two studies constructed relates to attendance and the ability to show active support. Up until the arrival of IEM and OWC to Sydney in 2017, most Australian esports fans had not had an opportunity to attend an esports event in-person. Attendees sought to understand what spectating at the site of play would be like in comparison to spectating at home. While ostensibly a motivation of curiosity, the act of attendance itself is a noted motive to travel to and be present at an event, playing significant role in fan identity creation. As Rogerson, Gibbs and Smith (2019) identify in a study of hobbyist boardgamers, attendance to major international events serves as a key element of "hobbyist engagement" distinct from other forms of hobbyist activities. In some cases, they note that the desire to attend among certain individuals was so strong that they considered traveling to a major boardgaming event even though they were unsure if they would actually enjoy it.

Simply being at such an event would constitute a defining moment in one's enthusiast identity, indicating engagement and dedication exceeding that of less driven individuals (Weed and Bull 2009; Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith 2019). Such notions tie into representations of 'active' in contrast to 'passive' forms of leisurely engagement and status within the social hierarchy of enthusiast cultures (Gibson 1998; Green and Jones 2005). Likewise, during screenings of large esports events at the esports bar it was common for patrons to gloat to their non-attending friends of their experience of communal spectatorship, sending photos and quips to show that they had in some way missed out on the 'true' experience of spectatorship in the bar. Attendance does not necessarily pertain to the site of play, but also to other sites which exist beyond the mundanity of the home.

This desire to attend to demonstrate active support is important to note, as it implies an underlying desire held by fans across the two studies that attendance was an important characteristic of an authentic experience of esports spectatorship, and therefore an important attribute of an authentic esports fan. In the context of conventional sport, the authenticity of attending the site of play to spectate is not controversial, as historically attending the site of play allowed the spectator to be as close to the competition as possible and watch it with as little mediation as possible (Bale 1998; Lamont 2014); the true 'original' and 'genuine' perspective. The increasing mediation of sports, even at the site of play, has

raised questions regarding whether contemporary sports can still be considered authentic from an objectivist perspective (Bale 1998; Virilio 1991). Nevertheless, the act of attendance continues to carry much subjective authenticity for sports fans, whether at the site of play or elsewhere. Esports however lacks a “meatsport” (Johnson and Brock 2019) through which a similar symbolic desire for attendance to the site of play could have been derived; as the ‘playing field’ of esports exists within a computerised system, it must be inherently mediated by a production crew to be spectated, with the feed shown in the stadium in most cases identical to that streamed remotely. Such notions can be further complicated when considering esports’ status as set of digital practices which require no centralised site of play; an attribute which benefited esports at the peak of COVID-19 restrictions which saw esports continue in many cases where conventional sports could not.

One may struggle to deduce why fans across the two studies placed much emphasis on attendance in constructing their authentic fan identities if solely looking at the canon of esports history alone. It is rare however for a direct history alone to be drawn on in constructing identities and values. Rather, Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) assert that tradition is invented, with “largely fictitious” histories used to construct a “continuity with a suitable historic past.” Collinson (2009) applies this notion of invented tradition to the context of Australian A-League soccer. First established in 2004, the A-League stood as a modernised rebirth of professional national soccer in Australia, replacing the declining National Soccer League. With little history and a blank slate to construct a new identity for Australian soccer fans, Collinson notes how Sydney FC fans drew on ritual songs of global soccer culture to provide a foundation of cultural authenticity for their own local identities as A-League fans. While a league on the opposite side of the globe to the mostly European-centralised football culture from which they drew, fans nevertheless adopted a suitable historic past which granted them not only a basis to construct their own local identities, but also the subjectively authentic fan characteristics to be accepted in global soccer communities. Similarly, the Australian esports fans across the two studies turned to the long-established conventions and rituals of Australian sport culture.

Much like Collinson observed of Sydney FC fans in the A-League, the Australian esports fans established a continuity with Australian sports culture through the ways they showed support, particularly through the rituals and chants they enacted. The iconic Australian sporting chant of *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi* was a recurring component of the soundscape at the bar and stadium, alongside enactments of *shoey*s (the act of drinking beer out of one’s shoe) at IEM and OWC Sydney. Being among the crowd as they enacted these rituals and waved Australian flags, the atmosphere felt aligned with any other major Australian sporting event. Indeed, fans had bridged a continuity with that of broader Australian sports, and thus performed an identity which closely resembles that of a conventional Australian sports fan.

It would be inaccurate to argue that it was the sole efforts of the esports fans to construct this sports-reminiscent identity for Australian esports. IEM and OWC Sydney were produced evidently as sports-inspired events, independent of fan rituals and behaviours. Outside of the tournament structure, production design, and events management, the act of hosting esports events in a stadium environment speak to a suitable historic continuity being made between esports and conventional sports on the organisational side. Standing as the “new cathedrals” (Trumpbour 2006) of the contemporary city, stadia exist as a monument to the value nations place on the pastime of sports, act as a site of worship to the historic events that took place inside them. By hosting esports events in stadia, these symbolic cultural

connotations are projected onto esports. Likewise, on a more grassroots level the esports bar in concept draws heavily on the already established sports bar, establishing a similar continuity.

These observations across the two studies reflect the broader sportification of esports. Sportification is the process in which sporting attributes such as fair play, competition, and aesthetics are integrated into a non-sporting activity to increase its attractiveness to new and existing audiences, promoting a familiar sense of popularity, engagement, entertainment, and excitement (Heere 2018). This process heavily relies on the broadly perceived positive image that sport holds across various cultures and societies. As Jenney et al. (2017) note, sport is seen as the goal that esports often aspires to. For example, Blizzard's *Overwatch League* is structured around a proven franchise-based model common in conventional sports, making the league more attractive to both investors and audiences by appealing to their notions of what a 'legitimate' professional sport should be (Ruotsalainen 2022). Likewise, esports events themselves have become more sports-like, featuring formats centred around the spectatorship of professionals framed as elite athletes, rather than participatory events where the line between player and spectator is less demarcated (Nick Taylor 2016). Sportification of esports has taken place across organisation and tournament structures, career progressions, management strategies, aesthetics, and its production as a spectacle (Karhulahti 2017; Heere 2018).

The sportification of esports not only establishes a suitable continuity with the well-received histories of conventional sports, but also works to obscure its historic ties to gaming practices and culture which have been the continued subject of moral panic (Shaw, 2010). Fans are however not passive consumers of media, holding power and agency to negotiate and affirm the meanings presented to them (Jenkins 2006; Ruotsalainen 2022). While organisations can provide a sportified framework through which they intend fans to present their support, fans ultimately hold the power to negotiate if such frameworks are to be accepted as authentic. This was particularly prevalent at OWC Sydney, where attendees were provided with Australian flags to not only rally support for the Australian team playing, but also to celebrate the location in which the event took place.

These negotiations reveal a complex intersection of identities. As a conformation to positive cultural appeal of sports, the sportification of esports inevitably influence notions of what an esports fan ought to be. Conversely, the push for esports to attain a sports status and the continued efforts by organisations and fans alike to sportify esports presents a challenge to hegemonic notions of what an authentic, sports-loving Australian looks like. At the intersection of these identity dynamics sits the negotiation of what an Australian esports fan ought to be. As one interviewee at OWC Sydney remarked:

I know I'm not into conventional sports really and being able to support the country in something that I genuinely enjoy definitely helps.

Here, this interviewee expressed how attendance and spectatorship at the event acted as an outlet through which to express patriotic support; an outlet he did not have in the form of conventional sports enjoyed by other Australians. A shift is observed in what can be considered a sport, and therefore who can be considered an Australian. Support for esports in Australia, when considering the sportified status of contemporary esports, communicates a reimagining of the authentic Australian; one which is more digitally aligned and can express national zeal through highly digitised sports-like outlets like esports. It is a stretch to

assert that such perspectives are shared by all Australians. Nevertheless, the engagement with these events by a sizable group of young Australians indicate an on-going negotiation, which at the least offers fans a potentially new-found opportunity to empathise with how other Australians experience nationalism and patriotism. As another interviewee explained:

For the longest time I didn't get the point of [conventional sports] until I got into esports. That's when it clicked for me, when I could empathise with the people following their sports. What they love about sports is what I love about esports.

Other developments in the Australian sporting landscape have challenged notions of what it means to be an authentic Australian. For example, the AFL Women's established a semi-professional Australian football league for female players in 2017. Creating opportunities for women to play high-level Australian football which had historically undermined their ability to play, the AFLW and the female fans it drew worked to challenge and reimagine the identities of Australian football and its fans (Lane 2018). While this challenge has seen resistance by men who see women inclusion in Australian football as an act of 'taking away' their sport and their dominance as the hegemonic fan identity, the AFLW has largely been seen as a positive change for the sport that will allow it to grow. As Burke et al. (2022) note, the AFLW and other women's leagues act as "sites for resistance to male control" over the sport. Symons (2022) explains that women followers of AFLW have "come back" to or "found" something that was missing from their identities as Australians. These observations of AFLW echo those relating to Australian esports acting as a site of negotiation and challenge.

Such challenges which bring forth ostensibly positive change can however have problematic connotations. While the AFLW has brought more female fans to the sport of Australian football, it is widely noted that female inclusion to traditionally male dominant sports tend to see women adjust themselves to conform to the hypermasculinity of such spaces (Pope 2013; Richards 2018; Palmer and Toffoletti 2019; Symons 2022). Unless there is a reflexive systematic change to the culture and values of the sport, uncritical inclusion of new fan identities sees individuals adapt themselves to fit in and feel belonged, reinforcing existing hegemonic norms. As Dixon (2015) explains in relation to soccer, efforts by women to fit in as 'real fans' by embracing masculine characteristics and behaviours do "not necessarily contribute to the quality of practice that those participants in the current sample desire."

When applying a similar frame to the two present studies, fan efforts to renegotiate the hegemonic Australian as one inclusive of esports fandom and digital forms of competition can alternatively be interpreted as reinforcing and affirming extant notions of hegemonic Australian national identity. In efforts to authenticate themselves as esports fans and partake in an authentic experience of spectatorship, those across the two studies fashioned their fan identities after those of Australian sport, enacting iconic sporting rituals and behaviours. Through these efforts and guided by the broader sportification of esports, fans found a sense of belonging as Australians by conforming esports and their identity as esports fans to the image of conventional sports, affirming this hegemonic type of sports fandom as central to the dominant Australian national identity instead of challenging it.

This was particularly evident in the values that were conveyed through fans' actions and behaviours in the stadia and bar. Such expressions reflect a performative aspect to these efforts to establish a continuity between sport and esports. At the two Sydney events, alongside other Australian esports events I have attended since, it is almost inevitable that a

spectator will attempt to pull-off a shoe in front of the camera. The drive to perform this ritual to the camera, almost as a game among spectators, is key to emphasise for two dominant reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates a more conscious effort to perform a type of identity which combines Australian nationalism, sports fandom, and esports fandom. But perhaps of greater note is the evocation of a specifically masculine interpretation of Australianess. As other works focused on masculinity in Australian gaming cultures have noted, Australian drinking culture and nationalism are intertwined closely by notions of masculine identity. Butt and de Widlt (2018) explain that these identities exist “as an ecology of complex entanglements,” illustrating a compounded identity of gamer, male, and Australian through drinking rituals performed at gaming events and functions, including shoeys at Australian esports events. Such performances work to not only portray a sense of modern nationalism to national and international audiences, but also appeal to entrenched notions of masculinity found in sport and gaming. Likewise, the very act of watching esports in a bar in the presence of alcohol speaks to the intersection of masculinity, drinking culture, and sports in Australia, establishing an authenticating connection to esports.

These adaptations to appeal to an entrenched sense of sporting masculinity reflect broader discussions in esports and games studies regarding “geek masculinity.” Originally coined by T.L. Taylor (2012), geek masculinity concerns an alternative form of masculinity which draws on, blends, and enforces values of hegemonic masculinity in a gamer culture context (Lockhart 2015). The resulting “hegemonic geek/nerd masculinity” (Ruotsalainen and Friman 2018) seeks to position and authenticate gamers as truly masculine, contrasting stereotypes of gamer and other geek cultures as meek, docile, and effeminate. Much like fans across the stadia and esports bar, geek masculinity operates on the basis of fitting in with that which is hegemonic, rather than directly challenging such notions and effecting systemic cultural change. Attributes of gamer culture are reframed to fit the merit structures of hegemonic sports masculinity; the dexterous mastery of a game is made equivalent to the athletic mastery of a sport, triumph over competitors is equated to the historic wins of sport canon, and the undying support for a favourite player or team is made admirable as the tribalism of a loyal fan (T.L. Taylor 2012; Ruotsalainen 2022). Other games scholars like Consalvo (2012) point towards the misogynistic toxicity of gamer culture as a product of “patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position”; the consequences of hegemonic masculine traits like aggression and hyper-competitiveness being enacted to authenticate a geek identity.

While it is true that fans across the two studies used esports as a newfound outlet through which to express Australian nationalism, this occurred primarily due to the sportified incarnations of esports allowing such templates of nationalism to be easily applied with minimal contention. Indeed, one of the core goals of sportification is to increase the appeal of a non-sport activity by making it more sports-like; a process which inherently appeals to and affirms widely held and positively perceived sporting values (Heere 2018). Despite constructing a bridge of hegemonic, sports-based geek masculinity to the Australian national identity, it is evident that esports in this instance only functions as a surrogate for this type of Australian nationalism when it is sportified and therefore ‘fits in’. Only when these activities are scaffolded to the established structures, aesthetics, and masculinities of conventional sport do they begin to act as an outlet for expressing Australian nationalism.

The key issue that hegemonic geek masculinity raises is its exclusionary properties. As Lockhart (2015) describes in the context of gamer culture, “nerd/geek masculinity turns the very traits nerds and geeks are often mocked for into evidence of manhood – at the cost of

excluding women and queer people from nerd and geek culture.” Given the already male-dominated character of hegemonic gamer culture, it is perhaps unsurprising that esports fandom has been so readily oriented to appeal to, adhere, and enforce the hegemonic masculinity of sport and Australian national identity. Across the two studies it was observed that men predominantly populated the two stadium events and bar. The sports-inspired rituals they enacted manifested a strong masculine bravado; chants and rituals like the shoey evoking a rambunctious sense of masculine domination and heterosexism typically reproduced in sports fandoms (Tarver 2017). It was evident however that these performed masculine traits were of only a specific type of masculinity.

Across the stadium events and the bar it was clear that not only were the majority of individuals males in their late teens and early twenties, but specifically young white men. This is not particularly surprising when considering that individuals of European ancestry constitute the majority of Australia’s population. Of greater relevance is how the non-white majority were excluded from the constructed masculine identities across the field sites. As Zhu (2018) notes from a broader Western context, the enactment of hegemonic masculine traits to legitimise esports as an authentic sport evokes a decidedly Euro-American masculinity that “historically exoticized and effeminized Asian bodies.” This contrasts the often proclaimed egalitarianism of esports, being a competitive activity where men and women can compete on equal grounds due to a reliance on dexterity rather than athleticism (Zhu 2018). Such a perspective can also be applicable to an Australian context, with hegemonic Australian national identity sharing the nineteenth-century imperial British ancestry Zhu speaks to which originated this effeminization of Asian men.

Similarly, scholars in the United Kingdom like Ratna (2014) explain that “national inclusiveness is not guaranteed for British Asian [football] fans.” She elaborates that despite British Asian men being subjected to a neocolonialist representation of being weak, they are nevertheless seen as a threat to the ethnic hegemony of the majority white populace. The colonialist white Australia policy sharply reflects this perceived threat, forbidding non-Europeans, particularly Asians and primarily the Chinese, from immigrating to Australia and challenging the ethnic white hegemony, despite being perceived as having an inherent inferior, servile nature (Curthoys 2003). Although formally abolished in 1973 (Jones 2003), Tavan (2005) describes the white Australia policy as having a “long, slow death,” maintaining a “residual appeal” as evident across several immigration controversies that have occurred after the policy’s apparent adjournment. With hegemonic Australian national identity tied to origin myths of white colonial sporting prowess (Mewett 1999; Horton 2000), Zhu’s assertion of white masculinity as a legitimiser for esports rings true in an Australian context.

A striking instance which illustrates these perspectives can be seen from the fieldwork conducted at the esports bar during the venue’s overnight screening of the *The International 8*, the 2018 championship event for *Dota 2*. As the championships approached its climax, it became evident that the two teams that would play against each other for the championships were the teams OG and LGD. The former was the favourite among the majority in the bar, largely because the mostly European team also featured the player Anatham ‘ana’ Pham, a then 18-year-old professional *Dota 2* player from Melbourne and the only Australian to be playing in the championship. Through ana’s inclusion on the team, OG stood as an unofficial Australian team which those in the bar rallied behind. In contrast, LGD was represented by an entirely Chinese team roster and stood as an opposing Chinese national team. Besides the majority white OG supporting patrons, there was also a small

group of around five Chinese Australians in the bar who were supporting LGD, wearing their team's colours among the sea of OG paraphernalia. Throughout the night and particularly when the championship match between OG and LGD was about to take place, this group of Chinese Australian fans were often the subjects of banter and light jokes directed from the OG supporting majority. While these jokes were light-hearted and the LGD fans took them in their stride by returning comebacks and banter of their own, these interactions nevertheless acknowledge an ethnic distinction. As I spoke with patrons around me, I was assured that there was no intended animosity, and that everyone at the bar was united across a flattened social hierarchy of broader esports fans. As one patron explained:

No matter who wins we're all still friends! We all love *Dota*!

Regardless, these actions reflect a type of ethnic hegemony long established in Australia, one where nationalism is tied to whiteness, and a specific type of masculine whiteness. While patrons had assured me that they had not been acting with explicitly racist intent, they unconsciously engaged in an implicit process of othering; a process that Snow and Oliver (1995) describe as key to strengthening group identities and defining membership borders. There existed two contrasting types of spectating experiences that night in the bar; one where the majority white patrons could enjoy the spectacle and ability to support OG with no scrutiny, and another where the minority Chinese Australian patrons were under constant scrutiny for lending support to a team which stood against the nominated 'Australian' team. These observations echo those made in other ethnographies of gaming spaces by Nick Taylor (2018) and T.L. Taylor (2012), which illustrate how normative young white males are invisible in such gaming spaces while those who are not are scrutinised, othered, and excluded. While many contemporary esports are ostensibly absent of specific national alignments, fans and audiences nevertheless apply a framework founded in established national racial norms to constitute their fandom in a sports-like manner. Despite their self-described jocular, light-hearted bantering, these actions nevertheless performed a process of othering which excluded the Chinese Australian fans supporting the opposing, designated non-Australian team from a comparable 'invisible' spectating experience and strengthened the inclusive, national sense of belonging and unity shared by the white OG supporting majority.

Curiously, ana's status as an Asian Australian did not sway patrons' conduct, nor was it mentioned or discussed by anyone. One could argue that this factor illustrates a more inclusive situation; a multicultural perspective where Australians of any background are celebrated as proud representations of the country, and that any interactions between the majority OG supporters and the minority LGD supporters centred on opposing team allegiances alone. However, when situated against broader interpretations of Australian national identity and culture, it reflects a type of previously discussed 'evidence' (Bruce and Hallinan 2001) which proves supposed positive race relations in Australian sport, where successful non-white Australian athletes are celebrated as proof of the opportunities provided them and the success of a multicultural Australia. Such perspectives blind observers to the systemic, hegemonic issues which underpin these situations and ultimately fail to effectively address the more complex issues which surround it. Despite ana providing Asian Australian representation on the world stage of esports, his success is subverted and whitewashed through this framing, co-opted to celebrate the hegemonic (white) Australian values which through multicultural benevolence (Gomá 2020) granted such opportunities to minority groups. In this way ana's success ceases to be about his own merits, and rather about the success of the system that has allowed him to reach such heights, linking to

existing narratives of multicultural Australia which 'emancipates' ethnic minorities from their cultural dissonance and hardships.

Final remarks

While colonial relics like the white Australia policy have ostensibly been abolished, their implications can still be widely felt. As Walters (2020) describes, it has been challenging to determine a unifying national identity across Australia's troubled history; the vision to construct a clear sense of sameness clouded. Yet, the world does not wait for one to be achieved. As new media and platforms like esports reach Australia and are adopted by its citizens, they too are drawn into ongoing debates surrounding what cultural signifiers and values constitute an authentic Australian, whether they be the subject of negotiation itself or the vessel through which existing values manifest. Across the two studies in the stadia and esports bar, fans worked to negotiate ways in which their enjoyment of esports could be used to constitute themselves as true, authentic Australians. Embracing broader movements to sportify esports, fans used their spectatorship across the two sites as an outlet to express sporting nationalism associated with hegemonic Australian identity. On one hand it is arguable that in doing so fans challenged hegemonic Australian identity by redefining what sporting nationalism can look like in the face of increasing global digitisation. On the other, fans nevertheless reinforced a range of problematic Australian values and norms. Embracing a hegemonic geek/nerd masculinity to authenticate their identities, a hegemonic white, masculine Australian national identity was strengthened through their fan actions and rhetoric.

Such developments are concerning in the context of esports. While esports as a dexterous sport is lauded for its egalitarianism and its status as a 'new media' distanced from the sectarian gatekeeping of traditional media (Burroughs and Rama 2015), these positive attributes stand to be diminished if esports continues to be conformed to hegemonic standards rooted in the past in efforts to seek authenticity. With the embracement of sportification as a proven and effective way for esports to gain credibility with audiences both old and new, fans too orient their practices and performances of identity to appeal to established sport fandom. An Australian esports fan can constitute oneself as a true Australian, assuming it guises the racial and gender discrimination which underscores Australian values like many other outwardly progressive interpretations of sport.

Despite the somewhat pessimistic tone of this conclusion, I would like to echo remarks made by Ruotsalainen (2022) that adapting esports for mainstream appeal and the growth of national sentiment in esports is not necessarily a bad (or good) thing. It is certain that without these recent shifts esports would not have grown to its current heights, which despite its flaws has granted enjoyment, career opportunities, and a broad sense of community to many. What needs to be better considered are the implications of these shifts to appeal to existing standards and values. As evident across the two studies discussed in this chapter, these efforts so far have been relatively uncritical, focused on immediate benefits and the desire to fit in. Greater reflexivity and critically are needed, from both the esports industry and fans, to ensure that the authentication of esports inspires positive change to the hegemonic values and identities they seek to appeal to, rather than blindly conform.

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